

'Contagion' authentic if showy

The film is somewhat realistic in portraying the response to a global epidemic

By Loretta Fuddy / Special to the Star-Advertiser

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I viewed the new movie "Contagion" Friday night, thinking that as director of the state Health Department, it would be important to get ahead of the curve on any misinformation. While at times the movie was overly dramatic, I was pleasantly surprised to see a good bit of authenticity.

On the Net

- >> For information on influenza prevention: www.flu.gov
- >> For information on Hawaii's emergency preparedness: hawaii.gov/health/BT/index.html
- >> CDC comments on "Contagion": www.cdc.gov/Features/ContagionMovie
- >> CDC blog on the movie: blogs.cdc.gov/cdcworksforyou24-7

It starts with Gwyneth Paltrow's character at an airport with flu symptoms, and a day later she is rushed to the emergency room where her condition worsens. The rest of the movie plays out the spread of the disease and development of a vaccine in a believable manner. The movie is fiction, but the scenario of a pandemic is credible, given the ease of international travel these days. The story portrays a highly infectious disease with high mortality rates that rapidly spreads around the world.

The two questions you may have after viewing such a movie are: "Could this situation happen and are public health systems ready to address such a situation?" The answer is "yes" to both questions. Public health officials in Hawaii, nationally and internationally worked collaboratively in 2002-2003 to contain the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic, which originated in Hong Kong and spread to 37 countries — similar to the "Contagion" storyline except that SARS had a case fatality rate of 10 percent, far less than what was portrayed in the movie.

The film focused on social disruption, panic and rationing of supplies with an extended event. This speaks to the importance of clear communication and good planning to deal with fear and provide direction to minimize person-to-person spread of illness. The film did well in emphasizing the importance of personal actions to prevent disease when vaccination is not an option. Matt Damon's character, after the deaths of his wife and son, was especially vigilant about protecting his daughter with strictly enforced social distancing.

During this flu season, it is good to remind everyone about the importance of hand washing, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying home from school, work or large social events if you have a fever or other flu-like symptoms. This is especially critical for pregnant women, the elderly and people with chronic diseases like diabetes. In "Contagion," these simple actions made the difference between life and death.

While the public health role was central to the plot it did not reflect the full extent of a joint response nor the volume of staffing that is necessary to handle such a pandemic. In the film, one disease investigator was sent to Minnesota and another to Hong Kong to do the detective work of tracing the disease. In a real-life response there would be hundreds of health professionals working on epidemiological investigation to understand the spread of the disease, the detection of the disease organism, the development of a vaccine and mass immunizations clinics.

For those interested in the science of influenza strain identification, control and prevention, the film does offer a glimpse into this important aspect of public health.

The Hawaii Department of Health is better prepared today than a decade ago to partner with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the event of a pandemic. During the H1N1 pandemic of 2009, lessons learned from our response efforts have application to other recent events. Epidemiologists, environmental specialists, public health nurses, laboratory staff, health educators and other departmental staff joined together this year in responding to the state's recent dengue

fever, working evening and weekend hours to interview individuals with symptoms to identify the index case and conduct laboratory testing.

Partnering with volunteers, schools and private health organizations has allowed the department to conduct school flu clinics for the past five years. This has increased our capacity for mass immunization. In addition, the department has been successful in developing a volunteer roster for our Medical Reserve Corps; this is necessary, as an extended event such as the one in "Contagion" will require far more staff than that of the department.

I would recommend the movie to adults and give it 2 stars (out of four) for being entertaining, well-paced and fairly accurate. I would give Hawaii three stars for its ability to respond to a public health emergency. In collaboration with CDC and private health care providers, department staff is prepared to respond to a range of health threats. However, always remember that you are the most important component in this equation, and always remember to practice prevention and immunize yourself and your family against disease.

Loretta Fuddy is director of the state Department of Health.